



State of Wisconsin
Department of Health and Family Services

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For Immediate Release

Seniors' Mental Health Problems Often Undetected *May is Older Americans' Month*

MADISON - As a part of Older American's Month, the Department is promoting awareness and understanding of mental illness in an effort to reduce the stigma that keeps many older adults from seeking help. Thousands of older persons in Wisconsin have a diagnosable and treatable mental health problem.

"We are working to promote prevention and early intervention with older adults. Health care providers are a very important partner in these efforts," says Joyce Allen, Director of the Bureau of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. "Working together, we can help older adults and their families recognize that depression can happen along with many physical illnesses such as diabetes, stroke, asthma, and heart conditions. We need to increase awareness and work to find simple and quick ways to screen for depression and then make sure people get the treatment they need."

The highest rate of suicide for any age group (19.4 per 100,000) is among older men age 85 and older, followed by those between 75 and 84. Older men are less likely to seek and receive treatment for depression than older women. Research shows when older persons get treatment for depression and other disorders, they can recover and continue to thrive, grow and enjoy life.

When older people visit their doctors, they may be reluctant to discuss feelings of sadness, hopelessness, anxiousness, irritability, loss of interest in pleasurable activities, or prolonged grief after a loss. Depression is *not* a normal part of aging as was once believed by many Americans. Some people expect older adults to be depressed or disoriented because of their age, their changing roles, or their loss of friends and family members so misdiagnosis and avoidance are common. Sometimes depression symptoms are misdiagnosed as side effects from medications or are seen as an unavoidable part of a co-occurring physical illness.

Symptoms will vary in severity and duration among different people, so visit your doctor if you have experienced five or more of the following symptoms for more than two weeks:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" mood
- Sleeping too little, early morning awakening, or sleeping too much
- Reduced appetite and/or weight loss, or increased appetite and weight gain
- Loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, including sex
- Restlessness, irritability
- Persistent physical symptoms that don't respond to treatment (such as headaches, chronic pain or digestive disorders)
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feeling guilty, hopeless or worthless
- Thoughts of suicide or death

It's important for adult children to talk with their parent about their concerns and ask them if it would help for them to accompany their parents to their doctor appointments.

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Family members should also look for prolonged recovery from medical treatment. If the person is getting worse or is taking longer to recover than expected, there could be mental health issues. According to research from the National Institute of Mental Health, rehabilitation for a hip fracture or heart attack is less successful and more expensive when complicated by depression.

“Wisconsin United for Mental Health is committed to increasing awareness and education with seniors and health care providers to gain a better understanding that mental illness is real, common, and treatable,” says Julie Whitehorse, Co-chair. “Too often unrecognized and untreated mental health disorders in older adults can lead to diminished functioning and lowered life satisfaction and quality of life. Recovery is possible and we are promoting the fact that older persons can be helped with the same success as younger people. In fact, 80 percent of older adults recovered from depression after receiving treatment that included both counseling and medication.”

For more information about the Department’s mental health, alcohol and other drug abuse services, go to http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/bqaconsumer/AODA_MH/AODA_MHindex.htm

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